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“In a Country where You couldn’t Make this Shit up”?: Literary Non-Fiction in South Africa

Hedley Twidle

In and around 2010, with the end of a decade perhaps demanding appropriately sweeping or summative statements, there was a claim made repeatedly and in various South African cultural forums. It was that fiction in this part of the world was being outstripped, outdone or overpowered by non-fiction. “This is obligatory reading for those interested in the current state of the nation,” read the review by the acclaimed novelist Marlene van Niekerk reprinted on the dust jacket of Antony Albeker’s much talked-about exercise in “true crime,” *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree* (2010), “It almost convinces one that fiction has become redundant in this country.”

Around the same time, Antjie Krog’s *Begging to Be Black* (2009) completed what her publisher soon began calling a trilogy, one begun with her celebrated account of covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a radio journalist, *Country of My Skull* (1998), and followed by *A Change of Tongue* (2003), a very personal set of meditations on translation—linguistic, literary, cultural and otherwise. In a typically multi-layered and experimental text, she records a conversation with a philosopher during a writer’s residency in Berlin, explaining her unwillingness to write a novel, and her sense that non-fiction remains the most appropriate mode of exploring contemporary South African society. Challenged by the academic, who suggests that surely it is literary fiction that allows the most scope in imagining the inner psyche of the (black) protagonists of her work in progress, she replies that in a place of such enforced apartness and ongoing inequality, it is precisely the limit, the *refusal* of imagination, imposed by non-fiction which draws her: “I want to suggest that at this stage imagination for me is overrated” (268).

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To give a final example: the current success of non-fiction in South Africa and its apparent ability to *exceed* the novelist's wildest imaginings was the subject of a panel discussion at the 2010 Cape Town International Book Fair, under the title "In a Country where You couldn't Make this Shit Up." In a packed venue, Altbeker was joined by Rian Malan, author of the bestselling (and surely the most flamboyant) work of non-fiction in South African publishing history, *My Traitor's Heart* (1990). Also on the panel was Jonny Steinberg, whose formidable three book sequence on, respectively, farm murders in Kwazulu-Natal, Pollsmoor prison gangs, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Eastern Cape—*Midlands* (2002), *The Number* (2004) and *Three-Letter Plague* (2008)—has probably done most to secure the pre-eminence of a kind of non-fiction that may or may not be best described as "literary" or "creative," but is undoubtedly intensively researched, textured, character-driven, self-aware and immensely ambitious. During a discussion to which I will return, the panelists differed in their emphases and examples, but seemed broadly in agreement that a plethora of emergent non-fiction narratives in South Africa (the trial of the disgraced CEO Brett Kebble, and the way it reached, labyrinthine, into both the old and the "new" South Africa, was repeatedly discussed) seemed to provide the most compelling and challenging medium for the serious writer at present.¹

My aim here is not to attempt the impossible task of adjudicating such claims, but rather to ask some questions around them: to enquire how and why they are being made now, and what this implies about what *the literary* comes to mean in contemporary South Africa. This, however, is not to imply that "literariness" be searched for as some abstract essence, or an SABS-approved stamp of writerly excellence. As John Carey suggests in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Reportage* (1987), framed in this way, the enquiry is neither interesting nor meaningful:

'Literature', we now realize, is not an objectively ascertainable category to which certain works belong, but rather a term used by institutions and establishments and other culture-controlling groups to dignify those texts to which, for whatever reasons, they wish to attach value. The question worth asking therefore is not whether reportage is literature, but why intellectuals and literary institutions have generally been so keen to deny it that status. (1987, xxxvi)

(He still, however, goes on to outline criteria for distinguishing good reportage from bad). But following this, it is then rather *the space of the literary*, or the changing fortunes of the category "literature," that become the objects of enquiry. What are the wider implications here with regard to what fiction and non-fiction are perceived

¹ Examples of various claims for the current emphasis on "reality hunger" in South African literary culture can be multiplied. In a written exchange between Duncan Brown and Antjie Krog which formed the basis for a panel discussion at the University of the Western Cape on 1 March 2011, the former remarked that creative non-fiction "has become in a sense 'the genre' of South African writing" in recent years, but also extended its lineage back to authors like Sol Plaatje, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Todd Matshikiza, Alan Paton and H. I. E. Dhlomo (Brown and Krog, "Creative Non-Fiction: A Conversation.").

to do, and the ways in which they constitute the public sphere? What disparate audiences are they created by, created for, or mediating between?

In the first half of this account, I suggest that the case of contemporary South Africa presents an interesting departure from the American model of “creative non-fiction” as it is celebrated and analyzed from the “New Journalism” of the 1960s to the present: still probably the most influential attempt to account for the particular possibilities of those written modes which, as Duncan Brown puts it, make their meanings “at the unstable fault line of the literary and the journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial” (2011, 1). The flamboyance and plenitude of this model must be met in the southern African context with ideas of limit, caution, cultural untranslatability and perhaps even unintelligibility. Yet at the same time, if one is to avoid reproducing a narrative of South African exceptionalism, such works must also be placed in the context of a wider, international turn toward a bewildering array of non-fictional forms.

NEWS STAYING NEWS

Writing in mind of the body of twentieth-century literary theory which shows up the tacit fictiveness, narrativity and intertextuality inherent in all kinds of discourse, there is of course the temptation to dissolve and blur the fiction/non-fiction divide in all kinds of ways, or even to regard it as hopelessly obsolete. And certainly, one of my main aims here is to suggest how any approach seeking to account for the full scope of literary production in southern Africa must go beyond this leaden binary to read a wide array of different written modes in counterpoint—investigative journalism, the prison memoir, the diary, “microhistory,” travelogue, life-writing, oral history, archival reconstruction, urban studies—with a sensitivity to how specific narrative techniques and rhetorical tactics are drawn on, refashioned and blurred into each other by both novelists and professional writers of non-fiction. Instead of hinging on the tired issue of fact or fiction, a genre-based approach allows one to probe the various types of “reality effect” established by different written modes, the various kinds of contract that they posit between text and reader.

One of the major aims here is to show how, in fact, instances of pre-eminent fiction and non-fiction from South Africa have for a long time been in an unusually intense, intimate and one might even say *constitutive* dialogue with each other. J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands* (1974), Karel Schoeman’s *Verkenning* (1996), Dan Sleigh’s *Eilande* (2002), Shaun Johnson’s *The Native Commissioner* (2006)—these are just some of many novels that are, in a deep structural sense, built out of a fraught dialogue with documentary sources, tainted colonial archives and the debates surrounding South African historiography in the last decades. By the same token, works like Krog’s trilogy and Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* (2006), while classed as non-fiction under publishers’ trade descriptions, are steeped in intensely literary histories and sensibilities. Even a more soberly documentary work like Mark

Gevisser's *Thabo Mbeki: A Dream Deferred* (2007) registers its debt to (and takes its title from) a model of *literary* rather than political biography.²

Yet on the other hand, any approach which entirely dispenses with the different kind of truth claim, or factual status, assumed by (or attached to), say, a novel and a work of social history, will remain somehow unsatisfying. Despite their resemblance in structure or technique, "literary nonfiction and fiction are fundamentally different" writes Eric Heyne in his attempt to theorise the first category: "this difference must be recognized by any theory that hopes to do justice to powerful nonfiction narratives" (1987, 480). Factual *status*, he writes in the course of making a useful basic distinction, is a category marker that has as much to do with how the narrative is presented and received as its actual verbal content; factual *adequacy* is a value judgment considering whether the work in question represents good or bad fact: "Status is either/or, a binary matter determined by 'the illocutionary intentions of the author', whereas adequacy is a relative matter open to debate between readers" (480–1).³ The idea that status and intention are so easily ascertained could be put in question by some of the genre-blurring texts from South Africa in recent decades; the novelistic elaborations in Krog's *Country of My Skull*, for example, might be held up against the liberties taken in Truman Capote's self-described "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood* (1966), which Heyne discusses and finds wanting as a work which violates its own rules. But if one holds, for the moment, to a broad distinction between fictive and documentary written modes, there emerges a seeming paradox underwriting the claims for the current pre-eminence of "literary" or "creative" non-fiction in South Africa, or perhaps a sense of surprise at how our literary history has turned out.

For whereas during apartheid, it was the domain of literary fiction, specifically the short story and the novel, which provided the most acclaimed versions—or to use Ezra Pound's phrase, the news that stayed news—of this southern African society, in the decades post-apartheid, when one would have expected an efflorescence of experimental, unconstrained fictive modes, the most significant literary production is judged to have shifted decisively into the realms of non-fiction. One can even attempt some brute quantitative analysis by comparing recipients of the two Sunday Times

² In the opening lines of *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (which takes its title from a poem by Langston Hughes), Mark Gevisser writes of being inspired to undertake the project when reading Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf and "re-encountering a typically Woolfian epigram": "'a good biography,' she had written in 1917, 'is the record of the things that change rather than of the things that happen.'" He also describes discovering Woolf as an impressionable undergraduate, remarking that "she had been to me what Marx, perhaps, had been to Mbeki: the spark that lit my intellectual life" (2007, xxi). The phrase "life-writing," which Lee uses throughout her scholarship and has done much to popularise (in opposition to the commodified, "shilling life" often implied by the word "biography"), is drawn from Woolf (Lee, *Virginia Woolf*).

³ Heyne is quoting John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* (1975). He uses Searle in discussing how "the distinction we commonly make between factual and fictional statements is based, not on any characteristic of the statements themselves, but on our perception of the kind of statement being intended. Suppose a friend tells an amazing anecdote. If we believe it to be a joke or an invention, we look for a punchline or narrative flourishes; if we think it is a true story, we may formulate questions in our minds, asking for supplementary information. The proper response is indicated by the type of story we think we are being told, and that decision in turn is influenced by factors such as our relationship with the storyteller, the social context, and the antecedent conversation, as well as by properties of the story itself."

literary prizes (see Appendix). Reading the Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction list against the Sunday Times Fiction Prize for the last ten years, who would deny that in terms of ambition, risk, and sheer writerly *work*, the non-fiction winners comprise the more compelling and influential body of texts from southern Africa? (And, to ask the more difficult question, why is it that, during a period when many readers of South African writing hoped for a more culturally diverse array of literary voices, one is confronted with the fact that most of these emerge from—or must define themselves in relation to—a problematic tradition of (white) South African liberalism enshrined in the very name of the prize?)

Put another way: when the imperatives of testimony and the demand for a literature of witness were at their strongest, the writings of the Nobel laureates Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee were deemed most adequate to the task (at least by national, and then international prize committees). Yet in the decompression of the post-apartheid, or post-anti-apartheid moment, when it would seem that authors should have had more freedom to write what they liked, there has been marked return to texts marked by topicality, immediacy, accountability and verifiability; by *responsibility*—with its immediate ethical connotations but also more distant etymological echoes of response, or responsiveness to the contemporary moment—rather than (as Coetzee once characterized the practice of novel writing) *irresponsibility*: “or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road” (1992, 246).⁴

It is even tempting to produce a quick sketch, or caricature, of recent South African literary history: Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) as the last major literary novel in English, a millennial text signalling the end of any easy political optimism and showing up the limits of the kind of truth and reconciliation that was being advertised in larger national narratives. His previous work, *Boyhood* (1997) had already joined, but at the same time set itself intriguingly apart from, a slew of memoirs and autobiographies which emerged in the 1990s (all of them, of course, ranged around that remarkable sublimation of private life into public good, Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), the originary text of the new nation).⁵

Stretching from Breyten Breytenbach’s prison books and Malan’s breakthrough work to Sindiwe Magona’s *To My Children’s Children* (1992), Gillian Slovo’s family biography *Every Secret Thing* (1997), and Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2010), one sees from the 1990s onward an outpouring of life-writing that makes South African literature a particularly rich case study when considering the construction of the narrative “I” and the limits of the confessional mode. At the same time, though,

⁴ I am indebted here to Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, who write of the flourishing of the autobiographical voice as a symptom of “the decompression, relaxation, and cacophony of the post-apartheid moment in general” (2000, 298). The idea of a “post-anti-apartheid,” rather than simply “post-apartheid” cultural moment during the 1990s is a phrase from Loren Kruger ‘*Black Atlantics*’, ‘*White Indians*’, and ‘*Jews*’, and was drawn to my attention by Rita Barnard “Rewriting the Nation.”

⁵ For an account of how Mandela’s “extraordinarily reticent, even colourless” (and retrospective) narrative of imprisonment might have displaced or substituted for a very different kind of prison book written during his incarceration, see David Schalkwyk, “Mandela’s ‘Missing’ Manuscript: Appropriation and Repression in Accounts of Robben Island Prison” (2005).

it should also be placed within a larger, worldwide turn toward experimental, genre-blurring non-fiction, and the increasing critical attention given to the work of writers like Amitav Ghosh, Orhan Pamuk and W. G. Sebald. “Isn’t it true that we are putting novels aside, or leaving them unfinished more often to engage with a reality phenomenon that may include many features, even pleasures, of the unreal or the fictional in any case?” asked Sarah Nuttall in a public lecture at the University of Cape Town on 14 April 2011 (herself the editor of several influential collections of South African non-fiction): “Doesn’t the imaginative power of pure fiction, as in the novel, feel less central to the culture than it did before?”⁶

In Afrikaans letters, Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (2007) has been widely read as marking some kind of limit text, or as “an extended wake at the deathbed of the farm novel,” the *plaasroman* that has proved so central and protean in this language (Olivier, 2011). This “encyclopedic recapitulation of the genre” is in terms of its architecture, ambition and sheer writerly heft, perhaps the only title on the fiction prize list to bear comparison with the immense research projects which produce works like Charles van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine* (1997), Steinberg’s prison ethnography and Gevisser’s biography of Mbeki.

Rumors of the death of the novel, though—or of its redundancy, obsolescence, decadence—have of course been greatly exaggerated: the claim is one of the true perennials of literary criticism. In Wolfe’s lengthy exercise in self-publicity that introduces the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*, practitioners of ambitious, long-form non-fiction are portrayed as a band of “literary Visigoths” who have dethroned the sacred novelists, just as proto-novelists like Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding (who promoted their works as “histories”) usurped the poets, polite essayists and men of letters before them. In Wolfe’s potted literary history, the post-war American novel—having abandoned the close link with reportage that distinguishes the monuments of nineteenth-century realism by Balzac, Dickens, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy—directs itself inwards, towards “neo-fabulism” and self-indulgent wordplay, leaving the “hulking carnival” of 1960s New York and California entirely to the attentions of writers like Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson and (most importantly) himself (47).

A more recent death of fiction at the hand of non-fiction is proclaimed in David Shields’ *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), where the author expresses a boredom with a form that is, as Sean O’Hagan puts it in his review of the work, “too hidebound by plot, too traditional and old-fashioned to reflect the speed of 21st-century culture. He is particularly bored by the well-wrought, beautifully written literary novel, as exemplified by Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* and Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*”:

‘I read these books and my overwhelming feeling is, you’ve got to be kidding,’ he remarked in a recent interview with the *Observer*: ‘They strike me as antediluvian

⁶ Sarah Nuttall, “Reality Hunger: The Way We Read Now.”

texts that are essentially still working in the Flaubertian novel mode. In no way do they convey what it feels like to live in the 21st century. Like most novels, they are essentially works of nostalgic entertainment'. (*The Observer*, 28 February 2010)

Shields's manifesto carries with it all the energy, but also the limits, of the polemic. Yet in a 2008 piece for the *New York Review of Books*, Zadie Smith articulates a similar, more powerful sense of culture-wide exhaustion with the "literary," "lyrical" or "liberal" Anglophone novel, misgivings that are all the more telling since they come from someone who, as she admits in the piece, has worked from within this mode. Reviewing Joseph O'Neill's post-9/11 novel of New York, *Netherland* (the latest edition of which carries an endorsement from Barack Obama on its cover), she writes:

All novels attempt to cut neural routes through the brain, to convince us that down *this* road the true future of the Novel lies. In healthy times, we cut multiple roads, allowing for the possibility of a Jean Genet as surely as a Graham Greene.

These aren't particularly healthy times. A breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked. For *Netherland*, our receptive pathways are so solidly established that to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition. It is perfectly done – in a sense that's the problem. It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait. (2009, 71–2)⁷

The European and American metafiction that stood in opposition to such lyrical Realism—from Robbe-Grillet to Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, DeLillo, David Foster Wallace—has, in her thumbnail sketch, "been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules, and dismissed, by our most prominent public critics, as a fascinating failure, intellectual brinkmanship that lacked heart" (73). Such literary experiments are the novelistic equivalent of the socialists in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*: "In this version of our literary history the last man standing is the Balzac-Flaubert model, on the evidence of its extraordinary persistence. But the critiques persist, too. Is it really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story that comforts us most?" (73).

"ON THE FRONTIER OF WORLD LITERATURE"

Such critiques can only be amplified in the linguistically diverse, absolutely non-bookish and tragically delayed post colony that is contemporary South Africa. And perhaps what makes Coetzee's *Disgrace* a limit text, purely in terms of literary

⁷ Zadie Smith's intimate relation with the work of E. M. Forster, and that writer's struggle with the limits of the "liberal" imagination in the long gestation of a novel like *A Passage to India* (1924)—these threads of Anglophone / metropolitan literary history make for valuable reading when placed alongside the South African materials considered here. See "E. M. Forster: Middle Manager," in *Changing My Mind* (2009).

historiography, is the uncompromising way that it stages this dilemma: on the one hand threaded through with allusions to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and a whole tissue of literary predecessors; on the other hand framed in mind of an audience that the narrator, looking out at his student seminar, deems post-historical, post-literate. The result was, in 1999, an unsettling mixture of radical newness and total anachronism: *Disgrace* was lauded for its contemporaneity, its sensitivity to the emergent—on the dust jacket it is acclaimed as being “on the frontier of world literature” by the critic Geoff Dyer (himself an important non-fiction innovator). Yet at the same time it is haunted throughout (as are all of Coetzee's “South African” novels) by a sense of utter belatedness, ineffectuality and incongruity. “More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa,” we read of the protagonist David Lurie in a moment interpreted by many readers of *Disgrace* as a distinctly personal intervention on the part of the Australia-bound Coetzee, a kind of farewell to a place “as irresistible as it is unloveable”:

Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. (117)⁸

A full account of the fate of the liberal or lyrical realist novel in southern Africa is beyond the scope of this enquiry. But in South African literary culture today, post-*Disgrace*, one could add a more local, more down-to-earth set of dissatisfactions with the “litfic” novel: a sense of over-production or glut, and a confusion about the economics of fiction publishing here (who is reading all these novels, and who can afford to buy them?)⁹ There is too the sense that new publications are discussed largely in promotional rather than critical forums: book review pages often read as little more than publishers' copy, while the most detailed public discussions of new work tend to occur at book launches: events that are, for all their value, inevitably premised on marketing and promotion. As several critics have begun to point out, this leads to a mechanism of mutual reinforcement, the “square dance” of certain individuals writing, publishing, reading and reviewing South African literature.¹⁰

The result in recent years has been the elevation of genre fiction like the crime novel into an object of literary excellence, rather than (probably a more accurate

⁸ The description of South Africa being “as irresistible as it is unloveable” is taken from Coetzee's 1987 “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech.”

⁹ I take the phrase “litfic” as connoting simply a genre among other genres from an interview by the science-fiction writer China Miéville: “My issue with litfic is not that it is a genre but that (a) it doesn't think it is and (b) it thinks it's ipso facto better than all the ones that are genres. Literary fiction of that ilk – insular, socially and psychologically hermetic, neurotically backslapping and self-congratulatory about a certain milieu, disaggregated from any estrangement or rubbing of aesthetics against the grain – is in poor shape.” Miéville identifies Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, set around the 2003 demonstration against the Iraq war, as a “paradigmatic moment in the social crisis of litfic.” “A Life in Writing: China Miéville.”

¹⁰ See Chris Thurman, “Make SA books matter.” Various responses to the claim that South African literary critics were too kind to local writers can be found on the LitNet website at: http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_custom&cause_id=1270&page=salit

description) the late arrival of a kind of fictional brand name or writerly franchise on South African shores. Perhaps the same might be said of the proliferation of vaguely magical realist texts in post-apartheid literature, a decade and more after the irascible narrator of Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* had called for a quota system on South American fiction in order "to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony":

Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the freedonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. Permit me to rap on the table and murmur 'Pass!' Novels set in the Arctic and the Antarctic will receive a development grant. (1984, 99)

The sense that works of "straight" historical reconstruction—whether concerned with the eighteenth-century Cape, as in Nigel Penn's *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways* (1999), or the life of Verwoerd's assassin Demetrios Tsafendas, as in Henk van Woerden's *A Mouthful of Glass* (trans. Dan Jacobson, 2001)—are those that seem to be taking the greatest risks, that they are somehow operating at a higher imaginative pressure than fictional treatments of the same historical periods, is in large part the provocation for this enquiry. So too is a personal conviction that the flamboyant but often derivative narrative procedures of (transplanted) magical realism do not adequately engage the trauma and difficulty, but also the fascination and density, of southern African histories.

In a well-known address of 1987, "The Novel Today," Coetzee argued strongly against his chosen form being seen as a lesser form of discourse to be checked against the answer script of history as if by a censorious schoolmistress: the novel as mere "supplement" to the history text (Coetzee, 1988). Yet when one reads Jeff Peires's account of the Xhosa cattle-killing, *The Dead Will Arise* (1990) alongside Zakes Mda's much feted *Heart of Redness* (2001), it is hard to describe the relation as anything else. Mda's novel, if not outright plagiarism of Peires's work, is indeed a supplement to (or a fictionalization-by-numbers of) a history text that, when one reads them together, seems somehow so much more densely *novelistic* than the novel it gave rise to. What, then, are the dynamics of this paradox, and how does one go about exploring their implications for literary culture?

The problem with citing (and teaching with) "The Novel Today," and the reason, perhaps, that Coetzee never allowed it to be reprinted, is that it tends to reinforce precisely the binary that is seen as so limiting at the outset. Because its metaphors are so extreme, we are left with an afterimage of this antagonistic opposition—"the novel" versus "history"—that overshadows the wider import of the address: that when history has been demythologized and revealed as a text among other texts, there exists a whole spectrum of different narratives and writings competing for legitimacy and primacy. Moreover, although the image of a censorious schoolmistress reading the novel against the answer script of history is a brilliantly polemical one, it does not, perhaps, acknowledge or allow for a common enough desire to discern *some* kind of limit or check to literary invention (or at least, to adapt Michel

Foucault on the archive, to derive *the law of what can or cannot be said* in any given mode of writing).¹¹ Particularly in a context where playful, magical realist elaborations like those of Mda or André Brink were for a long time almost the default setting for the world's new fiction, an urge arises to posit a boundary to the workings of the literary imagination, however difficult and contentious this may be.

In the second half of this piece, I would like to push some of these thoughts further by considering two encounters: one the panel on non-fiction at the 2010 Cape Town International Book Fair, and the other a revealing reading, or as I will argue, *misreading* of Coetzee's *Disgrace* by Steinberg. I want to take this encounter between perhaps the two most accomplished practitioners of, respectively, the novel and non-fiction as suggestive, and one which opens several lines of enquiry into writing from southern Africa in recent decades.

'KINGDOMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS'

Rereading Wolfe's famous set-piece today, and in South Africa, one is struck by its blithe self-confidence in assuming that the "new journalists" can have the best of both novelistic and non-fiction modes: the ability to move exuberantly between viewpoints and different streams of consciousness, all the while banking on "an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*" (49). The sense that a mere notation of the social milieu can outperform the carefully crafted imaginings of a novelist is a basic tenet of the "New Journalism," stated perhaps most memorably by Philip Roth in 1961: "The novelist lies helpless before what he knows he will read in tomorrow's newspaper. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist" (224).

The cliché that this boils down to in everyday discourse—that truth is stranger than fiction—was surely underlying the naming of the book fair panel which deemed South Africa "a country where you couldn't make this shit up." So too the presence of Rian Malan, described by his publisher's blurb as "South Africa's Hunter S. Thompson" and dressed the part in overcoat and beanie, brought some of the spirit of the New Journalism to proceedings. "Nobody can write fast enough to tell a true story," he states in the introduction to a 2009 edition of his selected journalism, *Resident Alien*—borrowing the aphorism from an American editor who "had a Kerouac aspect and broad streaks of Mailer and Hemingway" (ix)—before going on to remark that if this was "an artsy verdict on the limitations of the form" in the States, then in South Africa it was a self-evident law of nature, this being a place where there was "no such thing as a true story":

The facts might be correct, but the truth they embody is always a lie to someone else. My truths strike some people as racist heresies. Nadine Gordimer's strike me

¹¹ "The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass..." Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

as distortions calculated to appeal to gormless liberals on the far side of the planet. A lot of South Africans can't read either of us, so their truth is something else entirely. Atop all this, we live in a country where mutually annihilating truths coexist entirely amicably. We are a light unto nations. We are an abject failure. We are progressing even as we hurtle backward. The blessing of living here is that every day presents you with material whose richness beggars the imagination of those who live in saner places. The curse is that you can never, ever get it quite right, and if you come close, the results are usually unpublishable. (2009, x)

It is a passage in which an intense desire for that first person plural—"we"—is set against a realization of the "mutually annihilating truths" that make it unattainable, or able to be used only provisionally, and rhetorically, within the compass of a certain kind of speech act. Implicit here, as in the cover blurb by Marlene van Niekerk which began my account, is an assumption that serious writing is inevitably charged with delivering state of the nation reports, or at least accounts of "the way we live now," in the phrase of Anthony Trollope which is often used in handbooks of literary journalism. In South Africa though, a range of pressures—historical, cultural, linguistic—conspire to make the imagined community signified by this "we" uniquely urgent but at the same time unstable or impossible: a public sphere (envisioned by American writers like Wolfe) as constituted by serious, long-form analytical prose is quite simply unavailable, and Malan's approach is to prick the bubble of those who take it upon themselves to forget this.

Nadine Gordimer and her audience of gormless liberals then come to stand for a wider skepticism with regard to the production and dissemination of the entity "South Africa" within the "global imaginary" or "world literary system." Or whatever one chooses to call that late capitalist network of symbolic exchange where local histories are always at risk of becoming unmoored and serving as proxies in what Rita Barnard, in giving a rather comic account of her role as an Alan Paton expert for Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, terms "the globalisation of suffering."¹² (And Malan should know: on the dust jacket of the first edition of *My Traitor's Heart*, which was propped up for so many years in displays within Exclusive Books as perhaps the next worldwide bestseller following Paton, an international line-up of literary stars—Don DeLillo, John le Carré, Salman Rushdie—testify to its importance in curiously overblown rhetoric: an "explosion of truth-telling" which captures "the essence of the South African situation" (*Times Literary Supplement*); "a tragic masterpiece and a classic of our time" (*Time Out*); "a witness bearing act of the rarest courage" (Michael Herr).)

In line with the critique of understatement and the rubbishing of the "polite essay" that informs Wolfe's championing of the "New Journalism," Malan's tactic in his

¹² Barnard's article, which makes for intriguing and darkly comic reading, emerges, as the abstract tells us, from the author's work for Oprah.com: the website of Harpo Inc., Oprah Winfrey's vast multinational media corporation. From December 2003 to January 2004, Barnard served as the official "literary guide" to members of Oprah's Book Club as they made their way through Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The essay "meditates on this most recent chapter in this 'hypercanonical' book's transnational reception" (Barnard, "Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalization of Suffering").

latest collection is provocation and political incorrectness; at the end of his introduction he lists the accusations that have been leveled at him as badges of pride:

Some said racist, but that's so commonplace it's barely worth mentioning; any South African journalist who hasn't been called a racist or a self-hating black is a *kak* one whose lips are chapped from sucking the unmentionable appendages of those in power. The more interesting accusations were incest, homosexual tendencies, heterosexual debauchery, incompetence, deceit, murder, sissiness, 'carbuncular' practices, a secret alliance with the diabolical President Mbeki, spying for Inkatha, drinking too much, taking drugs and smelling bad.

What can I say? My name is Rian Malan and I called it as I saw it. (2009, xiii)

Some of the more fastidious members of the panel, however, were a little uncomfortable with the framing of the debate at the 2010 book fair. It risked reconfirming, they suggested, a kind of South African exceptionalism which verged on parochialism: a sense that ours is a national narrative of special interest and import to the wider world. Steinberg mentioned his own recent work on Liberia and its diaspora—you couldn't, he suggested, make *that* shit up either. Beyond even this, it seems that the whole tradition of Wolfe and his many imitators sits rather uneasily in a South African context. Not simply because the range of non-fiction that needs to be considered extends far beyond journalism and the reportorial, but also because many of those trying to think about such genres here have (as in the case of Krog) been drawn towards a very different idea of *limit* in imagining the inner lives of those they write about. South African writers simply "don't know this country well enough to write fiction about it," suggested Steinberg in another public forum on the topic.¹³

Malan countered that this did not contradict his argument; in fact it was central to it. In a place of such historically enforced apartness, where so many, different "kingdoms of consciousness" existed side by side without impinging meaningfully on each other, the task of the non-fiction writer became to find some way of bridging these, of transferring narrative material between them. Steinberg remarked in turn that he was "very taken" with Malan's metaphor; it suggested the particular and uniquely challenging kind of work required by the writer of non-fiction in seeking to negotiate between different life-worlds: an exercise in cultural transfer and translation which, if pulled off, might be uniquely rewarding for the reader.

The terms of the debate that the participants were involved in here will have a familiar ring to those who have considered the matter of how *literary* history might be written in contemporary South Africa. Similar reflections have been made, albeit in different vocabularies, by literary historiographers seeking to move away from the cultural balkanization implicit in colonial and apartheid ideology, while at the same time not lapsing into the too easily assumed narratives of national unity that characterized the 1990s. How, in other words, might one register the extreme

¹³ "Antjie Krog, Jonny Steinberg and Duncan Brown in Conversation on Creative Non-fiction." The paper which formed the basis of discussion, "Creative Non-Fiction: A Conversation—Antjie Krog and Duncan Brown," can be found online at the Book SA blog site: <http://book.co.za/blog/2011/02/25/antjie-krog-jonny-steinberg-and-duncan-brown-in-conversation-on-creative-non-fiction/>

heterogeneity and differentiation of cultural production here—a place where “mutually annihilating truths coexist entirely *amicably*” (my emphasis)—without replicating the discrete linguistic and ethnic identities propagated by apartheid ideologues (or indeed, liberal literary anthropologists)? Or to ask the question from the other direction: how could one articulate a model of hybrid cultural production or trace lines of literary influence in ways that would not diminish the persistence of structural inequality in a post colony like South Africa?

METAPHORS, MIGRATIONS, GENEALOGIES

“Introductions to South African literary culture conceived as an entity have a peculiar trademark,” writes Leon de Kock in an influential contribution to the debate, “They apologize for attempting to do the impossible and then go ahead anyway.” Such “rhetorical genuflection,” he adds, shows up a significant fault line in the field of South African literary studies, “although ‘field’ is a problematic metaphor here, like almost every other metaphor one cares to use” (2001, 1). It is a reminder of the extent to which intellectual approaches often rely on figurative models, in which metaphor can become less an illustrative shorthand than a deep-rooted conceptual apparatus that sets the horizons of what can be thought. And in fact it seems that the main conceptual “moves” in the field of literary historiography in the last decades can be traced as a succession of metaphors, each with their own possibilities and limits.

As one of the first critics to explore the idea of literary history written *about* rather than *within* divisions, the critic and anthologist Stephen Gray began in 1979 with the guiding figure of an “archipelago” of separate islands, but moved over the next ten years to a metaphoric of trading and translation: “the basic act of writing is of carrying information across one or other socio-economic barrier, literally of ‘trading’” (1989, 16–24). In Gray’s intellectual model this has an optimistic, liberatory dimension: translation (in its widest sense) becomes a “major, life-sustaining activity” that energizes the literary system, opens the way for reciprocity in communication and even comprehends the long and ongoing historical transfer between the oral and the literate: if “the shift from the spoken to the written persists as our major event,” then there emerges, he suggests, the recurring motif of writer cast in the role of transcriber, shaper and “amanuensis of the spoken word” (1985, 10).

In a response to what he perceived as the prematurely celebratory tone of this and similar models of literary history put forward in the early 1990s—Michael Chapman’s ambitious attempt, for example, “to read the literary and historical terrain as a semiotic whole” (1996, 46)—Malvern van Wyk Smith countered that, in fact, much of the southern African literary canon could in fact better be described as singularly uncurious across “the cultural and linguistic rifts and abysses which till recently defined our socio-political landscape” (1996, 75). Adapting Harold Bloom, he describes it as in fact revealing “the anxiety of non-influence,” as a series of contiguous literatures bound to their own subculture and developing in dispiriting

isolation, and trading instead on the *illusion* of influence. Writing of Alan Paton, he remarks:

The archaic biblical cadences ascribed to his Zulus in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and the portentous narrative inflections of *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) owe nothing to either Zulu or Afrikaans literature and everything to a well-worn English convention of rendering in an anachronistic register the mythical simplicity of rural innocents retarded in a time-warp. (1996, 80)

Again, as with Barnard's misgivings about Oprah's "hypercanonical" Paton, or David Lurie's doubts about the possibility of representing contemporary South Africa in stretches of ossified English code, it is worth pausing here to register the dense cluster of factors which disclose the space of the literary in late twentieth-century South Africa: the controlling hand of liberal guardianship; the disquieting reasons for international success and a divergence between local and global readerships ("distortions calculated to appeal to gormless liberals on the far side of the planet"); the traffic from rural and urban life-worlds that underpins so many acclaimed South African novels; and the troubling dynamics attending what seems at first to be well-meaning transfer of non-English speech patterns into the cadences of the liberal, lyrical novel.

Writing in mind of such critiques—and with regard to what he, as a working literary translator calls "the space of *trans*-" (2012, forthcoming)—De Kock offers a more vexed metaphor for literary production here. Drawn, significantly enough, from a *historical* work on the Eastern Cape, Noel Mostert's *Frontiers* (1992), the idea that southern Africa's colonial contact zones mark a "hemispheric seam" in world history (1992, xv) is developed as a means of exploring a recurring crisis of representation within South African literary culture. In De Kock's account, "the seam" becomes the site where the "sharp point of the nib" (as an agent of colonial modernity) is imagined as a "stitching instrument" engaged in a compulsive attempt to "suture the incommensurate" (2002, 11). The result is a paradoxical process in which the very effort of joining together must always continue to mark an unclosed, and uncloseable, divide: "on the one hand the effort of suturing the incommensurate is an attempt to close the gap that defines it as incommensurate, and on the other this process unavoidably bears the mark of its own crisis, the seam" (2002, 11).¹⁴

It is a metaphor which, painfully, pulls both ways, and helps to suggest, even at the microcosm of language usage, why the different kinds of truth claim made by literary fiction and non-fiction—or to use Coetzee's shorthand, "the novel" and "history"—are to be found in such intimate enmity in the southern African context. Even the most cursory attempt to chart a historical genealogy of non-fictional modes here reveals that "South Africa" has for centuries functioned in the global imaginary as a kind of *locus classicus* for the writing up of human rights abuses. I use the phrase

¹⁴ It is worth noting that, in turn, the editors of the recent *Cambridge History of South Africa* (2010) draw on the literary historiography of De Kock and others in framing their enquiry: another example of the compulsive cross-reading or cross-referencing between literary and historical modes which I would see as characteristic of writing (in) South Africa.

writing up in two senses: firstly to evoke the figure of the foreign correspondent (or any writing outsider) filing a report for a distant audience, a report often registering the pressure of the exotic or ethnographic; and secondly to suggest how texts from Africa South often register a (premature) pressure to resolve into a fixed, transportable set of meanings: to be (too quickly) *finished up*, that is, or *sewn up*.

“What is South Africa?” asked Jacques Derrida in a piece that helps one to see how “this concentration of world history” has often been envisaged as a kind of prism through which one sees refracted, in a particularly immediate way, the disjunctures, inequities and tight spatial controls of “global apartheid”:

If we could forget about the suffering, the humiliation, the torture and the deaths, we might be tempted to look at this region of the world as a giant tableau or painting, the screen for some geopolitical computer. Europe, in the enigmatic processes of its globalization and of its paradoxical disappearance, seems to project onto this screen, point by point, the silhouette of its internal war, the bottom line of its profits and losses, the double-bind logic of its national and multinational interests. (1986, 337)

From the early travelogues of Kolbe and Sparrman detailing the abuses of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), through John Philip’s *Researches in South Africa* (1828) and Emily Hobhouse’s despatches on the Anglo-Boer War, to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, (local) practices of reportage here have continually interacted with a (global) appetite for modes of witness and testimony. And a similar impetus, which shows itself in a text claiming greater purchase on “the real,” is also strongly present throughout the literary canon, from Olive Schreiner’s famous Preface to *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) onwards: “a pervasive attempt to weld signifier to signified, to bypass the fraudulent contingencies of the sign and seek a place where things mean what they say” (2001, 17). This highly pressured attempt to fuse, or “splice,” word and world, though, can only but speak to the impossibility of the join. The result, De Kock suggests, is to produce, cumulatively, a “reality imperative” which is there almost wherever one looks:

... in the country’s vast, almost overpowering tradition of autobiography (not to mention its annals of invested biography); in the stuffy, compromised archives of liberal-humanist dissent in South Africa; in the mimetic dullness of much ‘relevant’ anti-apartheid fiction; in the country’s strictly empiricist tradition of historical writing; in the assumptions of ‘revolutionary’ poetry about an opposition between ‘aesthetics’ on the one hand, and ‘raw experience’ on the other; and, abundantly, in the many acrimonious critical debates about ‘materialist’ versus ‘idealist’, or ‘empirical’ versus ‘postmodernist’ agendas. It is as though the South African literary-cultural dialogue is a conversation trapped in its own founding disjunctures, and as if the splicing remedies resorted to as a way of escaping infinite disagreement have become constitutive to the country’s protocols of symbolic exchange. (2003, 92–3)

Looking back across the literary-historiographical debates, then, one makes out a conceptual terrain of abandoned, outdated or increasingly convoluted metaphors—archipelagos and traders, rifts and bitter almond hedges, dream topographies, fault

lines, forced landings, staffriders, spectacles, seams, splices—which in their varied attempts to manage the play of sameness and difference range from the impossibly naïve (“rainbow nation”) to the academically embattled (“entanglement”). The former risk suggesting too easy a move from the “I” to the “we”; the latter seem sometimes to do little more than re-inscribe complexity, offering themselves less as shapes for understanding than a return to the experiential chaos prior to any artistic or conceptual mediation. How then could one move beyond the sense of entrapment and recurrence described above: the shuttling between an infinite series of paired terms which are generated by extravagant (and unexamined) claims on “the real”?

In their introduction to the recent *Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2011), editors David Attwell and Derek Attridge resist the temptation to offer another metaphor, but depart in some ways from Van Wyk Smith’s strictures. They suggest that writers, narrators and other verbal artists in southern Africa *did* indeed overhear and influence each other, but that this did not take place within the kind of forums where literary critics (especially those like Harold Bloom) tend to look:

If cross-cultural influence is seldom discernible at the level of the individual author responding to a particular genius, it is unmistakeable in broader generic and rhetorical terms... These connections are not those of the private study but of colonial modernity’s encounters in places like the mission school classroom, the colonial kitchen, the political meeting, the frontier courtroom, the shebeen, the apartheid jail, the rehearsal room, the radio studio, the suburban writers’ group, the editorial desks of dozens of arts magazines and publishers. Admittedly, the precise itineraries of these generic migrations are difficult to trace but such is the nature of the culture and the work that it demands of its literary historians. (2012, forthcoming)

Novels, one might say, are too often read alongside other novels; poems are read alongside other poems, rather than the many other modes of writing jostling for position in the literary marketplace. Influence is tracked at the level of the literary, when in fact the literary (especially because of the South African “reality imperative” and the pressure for a writing of witness) may be in much closer dialogue with modes of verbal culture that are more topical, accessible, context-dependent and ephemeral. The intellectual challenge is then not to describe a cultural predicament as entangled, but rather to follow and render visible the discrete strands that constitute this entanglement. In turn, the tracing of such itineraries, genealogies and “generic migrations” inevitably becomes a historically textured, and sociologically inflected mode of research: what the editors describe here as a model of South African *literary* history is not far removed from the type *social* history that emerged in the 1980s (much of it associated with the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand), and which underwrites the kind of non-fiction now achieving prominence.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jonny Steinberg’s explicit use (in *The Number*) of Charles van Onselen’s life of “Nongoloza” Mathebula, *The Small Matter of a Horse* (1984), is but one example of this. In the 2008 republication of this influential “history from below,” Steinberg writes the Foreword.

In writing idealistically of the writer as “ammanuensis of the spoken word,” Gray was referring primarily to the transcription and poetic re-working of indigenous oratures (as in the Bleek and Lloyd records); or else, the achievement of a spoken feel in the “told tales” of the doggedly local writer whom he did so much to promote: Herman Charles Bosman. But it is surely an insight that comes into new significance when one considers the major non-fiction texts of the last decades: the immense projects of listening, transcribing, sifting, arranging and intervening that produce works like Peires’s *The Dead Will Arise*, Hofmeyr’s ‘*We Spend Our Lives as a Tale that is Told*’ (1994); Van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine*, Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, or Steinberg’s *The Number*—works that are in one sense long exercises in “oral history,” although that dated, anthropological label seems inadequate to log the self-consciousness, experimentation and methodological openness which are written into all of the above.

At this juncture one might even offer a reason for why it is such books that seem to be galvanizing the literary system in southern Africa at present. Perhaps it is these modes which allow for a reconfiguring of those fossilized stretches of English code imagined by David Lurie, and for the simple reason that they are made up in large part not of the words of lyrical narrators, but from the words of often non-literate (and certainly non-literary) individuals, many of whom use English as a second or third language. As such this is a medium in which there is less chance for the overworked, over-familiar and sometimes self-satisfied lyricism which Zadie Smith finds troubling in a twenty-first-century literary sensation like O’Neill’s *Netherland*.

The result, particularly in the work of Jonny Steinberg, is a highly readable but unadorned and largely informational prose. It is a kind of writing honed to deliver large amounts of contextual data as economically as possible. If contemporary writers, to repeat his provocative formulation, don’t know South Africa well enough to pen fiction about it, the task of the worker in non-fiction is then to redress such ignorance, and to devise strategies to circumvent the persistent lack of curiosity across socio-linguistic barriers that still characterizes much writing in English.

The immense work of cultural translation represented by each of Steinberg’s books requires that large amounts of information be released to the reader, slowly and manageably; even pleasurably, since as he admits, each of his works is in fact a rather uneasy mixture of disturbing subject matter and considerable intellectual excitement.¹⁶ If the literary narrators who trouble Smith and Shields are too *knowing*, then recent works of non-fiction in southern Africa might in one regard represent a significant breach with such Anglo-American liberal/lyrical modes: to read *The Number* or *Three-Letter Plague* is to be exposed to a torrent of new information previously held in trust—about prison subcultures and rural communities—and also to be faced with an array of difficult questions about the politics of such knowledge: how it is gained and how it should be used.

One could add that the kind of shallow linguistic transfer that has troubled readers of the South African canon—the defamiliarised and often patronizing rendition of

¹⁶ Jonny Steinberg, Seminar at the English Department, University of Cape Town, 11 May 2011.

the patterns of Afrikaans or isiZulu speakers in English-language novels – is eschewed for a much smoother, more contemporary and workmanlike prose surface. The books are constituted by other people's words, but these spoken life stories are absorbed into a larger, even-handed narrative voice (one which does not trade on their idiolects or linguistic idiosyncrasies). Yet equally, as the final part of this essay will suggest, the current prominence of non-fiction in South Africa, and the particular work of translation that its prose demands, can perhaps lead in turn to a forgetting of the multivalence and ungovernability of language itself: a curtailment of that space of the literary which it is the (impossible) task of the critic to render anarchic, evolving, and labile.

'GENEROUS ANTHROPOLOGIES OF AFRICAN MISTAKES'

In a dense piece of June 2007 for *Business Day*, Steinberg discusses a book by the French anthropologist Didier Fassin which offers an exceptionally generous, empathetic attempt to understand the AIDS dissidence of the then President Thabo Mbeki (and here he might as well have been referring to the biography by his friend and intellectual colleague Mark Gevisser, published in the same year). In both Fassin's *When Bodies Remember* (2007) and Gevisser's *The Dream Deferred*, we are shown that Mbeki is no eccentric dissident; rather "he gives voice to an aggrieved and quintessentially African experience, one shared by millions" (2007, 270). As with orthodox, colonially blinkered medical histories of tuberculosis in the twentieth century, the international discussion on AIDS is yet another discourse on illness that remains "silent about poverty, about political economy, about the modern environmental conditions that have been killing Africans for generations" (272).

At this juncture Steinberg makes the surprising move of invoking Lucy Lurie, the rape victim in Coetzee's *Disgrace* who "comes to see the attack on her as a kind of historical reparation." In her decision to remain on her Eastern Cape smallholding (we are told), Coetzee conveys Lucy's subtle racism, portraying someone who is "fatalistic about the future because her expectations of black-ruled South Africa are terribly low. Trying desperately to understand her attacker, she condemns him" (274). So too, in their ostensible generosity, Mbeki's apologists end up condemning African nationalism by implying that it was destined to get the etiology of AIDS horribly wrong:

One hopes that history will come to judge Mbeki's AIDS dissidence as an aberration in the African nationalist project. For an African nationalism congenitally suspicious of foreign knowledge and technology beckons a future of low expectations, the sort to which Lucy Lurie resigned herself.

In the meantime, we should beware generous anthropologies of African mistakes. (2007, 274)

No doubt Coetzee's novel was read in these stark, unforgiving terms by many South Africans; yet it is strange to see such an interpretation cited as cultural orthodoxy, as "fact," by such a formidably intelligent writer. Ever since *Disgrace* was cited in a 2000 ANC submission about racist stereotypes in the media, academic critics have been lining up to demonstrate that, even at the micro-levels of grammar and syntax, this is a novel which is not saying what it seems to be saying; that all its events reach us through the *style indirect libre* of a protagonist for whom we feel a disquieting mixture of complicity and repugnance. If anyone is the fatalist, it is David Lurie, the unreconstructed male presence who filters the narrative and sees events in abstract terms that are of no help to his daughter: "It was history speaking through them, a history of wrong" (156). By the end of the book even he seems to be undergoing some kind of profound change, while her decision to remain on the land is surely something more opaque and open-ended than Steinberg's paraphrase suggests.

A nuanced and carefully historicized reading of the politics of HIV/AIDS dissidence, in other words, yields to a surprisingly cursory account of a literary novel. A newspaper column is hardly the space to engage in close textual analysis; but still, it seems that one encounters here a revealing example of the constrained way in which a literary work is made to signify in public forums, and how it can so often be folded back into the discourses from which it seeks to distance itself. Might this, in Steinberg's case, even be an example of the deliberate misreading of a predecessor that is, in Harold Bloom's sense, essential to the workings of literary influence: that act of caricature and "creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misrepresentation" (1973, 3)?

Perhaps the clarity of Steinberg's prose and the range of his enquiry demand such curt readings of novels, but the privilege of the literary is surely to remain naggingly unfinished, opening out into a world of human relations that extend beyond the reach of political science. This though, is not necessarily the preserve of the *novel*. Steinberg's own work shows itself as particularly aware of the pressures involved in closing down or "rounding off" a narrative (particularly when it deals with living subjects), and the distortions involved in that process. We are left with a similarly troubling irresolution at the end of *Three-Letter Plague*, where the protagonist "Sizwe" has still not tested for HIV/AIDS; or indeed, the ending of *Midlands*, where a long story of misunderstanding and mistranslation with regard to this African farm seems poised to repeat itself.

One could draw another point of contact between Coetzee and Steinberg here in that all these are works in which the common South African literary trajectory from rural to urban is reversed. The narrative direction that underlies so much literary liberalism, from R. R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928) to Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* has been reconfigured into a far more complex and opportunistic pattern of switchbacks and crossings between "tradition" and "modernity" where the conventional binaries of the pastoral are no longer adequate. *Disgrace*, *Midlands* and *Three-Letter Plague* (like Van Onselen's *Kas Maine*, and even Malan's account of

Msinga which closes *My Traitor's Heart*) move from the city to the country, yet a country which is revealed as just as densely layered and contested as the post-apartheid metropolis:

The countryside clattered with the noise of its cruel politics, each new scene a micro-world of stubborn memories and pernicious games. I remembered my trip through the plantations with Jude Fowler. I had remarked on their beauty, he on their ugliness. I was looking at the blend of colours, as an outsider does; he understood things by their history and their function. For a brief moment as I drove back to the Benfield farm, I imbibed the landscape as a native does; everything marked by a thousand particulars; the history of power and people engraved in every mutation. (*Midlands*, 2002, 258)

The fact that both Coetzee and Steinberg are in a sense anti-pastoral, or even post-pastoral writers may go a long way to explaining why (even though both have rejected crude forms of national allegory) their works have spoken so powerfully about a place where even something as apparently self-evident as topography can be revealed as a complex and compromised amalgamation of literary topoi.

The last section of Steinberg's *Notes from a Fractured Country* seems after all to provide a far more apposite gloss on the troubled rural world of *Disgrace*. In the columns grouped under "Countryside," he describes the "drifters, not yet properly urban, no longer properly rural" who "journey...back to their ancestral homes incessantly during the course of their failed adult lives" (327). Here perhaps is a sociological underwriting of the perpetrators who Lucy sees still hanging around the district after her ordeal, and whom her neighbor Petrus has no choice but to support. Contra to his paraphrase of *Disgrace*, Steinberg's work then becomes an intertext which in fact goes some way to dispel the morbidity and apparent irrationality of Lucy's decision to remain on the land in a situation which Lurie (and many other readers) see as irredeemable: "ridiculous, worse than ridiculous, sinister" (200). At a historical juncture when the world's urban population has just outstripped that of the countryside, the particularly South African social dislocation evoked in the last paragraphs of *Notes from a Fractured Country* takes on a grimly global resonance:

The old patriarchs scan the horizon in the hope that one day soon they will no longer be greeted by the sight of their sons and daughters, returning empty-handed. The longer the city falters, the heavier the countryside's burden becomes. It has not the strength to survive as the dumping ground of the unwanted. (327)

Finally, this productive clustering of fiction, life-writing, microhistory and journalism suggests how accounting for the literary in contemporary South Africa asks for a method of cross-reading. This would be one which plays across different genres and modes of address rather than remaining trapped within those protocols of symbolic exchange that thrive on an endless series of tired oppositions: "the novel" versus "history"; "aesthetics" versus "raw experience"; "committed" versus "formalist." If the task of the critic is to enlarge the space in which any given text can resonate, then much contemporary writing requires that traditional "literary" forms like the novel

are read alongside or in counterpoint to all kinds of other work in prose (or indeed film, visual and performance culture).

The brief treatment of the various stories of an African farm above suggests how different modes of treating the same subject (each with different senses of “truth-directedness”) can be read in dynamic relation, so revealing the possibilities and limits of each. The kind of rivalry that novelists, New Journalists and historians have often been keen to assert is better set aside in favor of a whole spectrum of texts: each modifying others, each competing for authority and influence in an oversubscribed literary marketplace (one where the printed page is increasingly being overwhelmed by the screen, whether cinematic, televisual or digital). Nonetheless, one is left with the paradox that the centuries-old opposition of “the novel” and “history” can hardly be abandoned. Provoking the complex play of *responsibility* and *irresponsibility* that lies at the heart of reading *the literary* (non-fictional or otherwise), this binary remains—such is the complexity of apprehending texts, and the sheer volume of narratives that must be processed in a digital world—both inhibiting and energizing; inadequate and indispensable.

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APPENDIX

Sunday Times Literary Awards

Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction

- 2010 – Albie Sachs for *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law*
- 2009 – Peter Harris for *In a Different Time*
- 2008 – Mark Gevisser for *Thabo Mbeki – The Dream Deferred*
- 2007 – Ivan Vladislavić for *Portrait with Keys*
- 2006 – Jointly awarded to
 - Edwin Cameron for *Witness to AIDS*
 - Adam Levin for *AidSafari*
- 2005 – Jonny Steinberg for *The Number*
- 2004 – Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela for *A Human Being Died That Night*
- 2003 – Jonny Steinberg for *Midlands*
- 2002 – Jonathan Kaplan for *The Dressing Station*
- 2001 – Henk van Woerden for *A Mouthful of Glass*
- 2000 – Anthony Sampson for *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*
- 1999 – Jointly awarded to
 - Antjie Krog for *Country of My Skull*
 - Stephen Clingman for *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*
- 1998 – John Reader for *Africa: A Biography of a Continent*
- 1997 – Charles van Onselen for *The Seed is Mine*
- 1996 – Margaret McCord for *The Calling of Katie Makanya*
- 1995 – Nelson Mandela for *Long Walk to Freedom*
- 1994 – Breyten Breytenbach for *Return to Paradise*
- 1993 – Tim Couzens for *Tramp Royal*
- 1992 – Thomas Pakenham for *The Scramble for Africa*
- 1991 – Albie Sachs for *Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*
- 1990 – Jeff Peires for *The Dead Will Arise*
- 1989 – Marq de Villiers for *White Tribe Dreaming*

Sunday Times Fiction Prize

- 2010 – Imraan Coovadia for *High Low In-between*
- 2009 – Anne Landsman for *The Rowing Lesson*
- 2008 – Ceridwen Dovey for *Blood Kin*
- 2007 – Marlene van Niekerk for *Agaat*
- 2006 – Andrew Brown for *Coldsleep Lullaby*
- 2005 – Justin Cartwright for *The Promise of Happiness*
- 2004 – Rayda Jacobs for *Confessions of a Gambler*
- 2003 – André P Brink for *The Other Side of Silence*
- 2002 – Ivan Vladislavić for *The Restless Supermarket*
- 2001 – Zakes Mda for *The Heart of Redness*